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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 002896

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV PINR IZ

SUBJECT: MOI PRESS CONFERENCE MISSES HUMAN RIGHTS MARK AND RAPPROCHEMENT WITH ARAB SUNNIS

REF: A. BAGHDAD 2120

1B. BAGHDAD 2194

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT S. FORD.
REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY. Senior SCIRI official and Minister of Interior Baqr Jabr lost an opportunity to reach out to the Sunni Arab community by demonstrating that the MOI is serious about protecting human rights during his July 7 press conference. Jabr said the Ministry's three top priorities are providing security, fighting corruption, and protecting the human rights of Iraqis. However, neither Jabr nor Interior Ministry IG Nori al-Nouri offered specific details of investigations into allegations of abuse or prosecution of perpetrators of such abuse. Rather, Jabr called reports of torture and abuse in the press 'misrepresentations' and claimed that NGOs and human rights organizations have access to MOI facilities. Sunni Arab reaction to the press conference has ranged from negative to scathing, with a Sunni Endowment member calling Jabr 'a liar.' To be fair to the Interior Minister, he is working to stop a terror campaign and insurgency that is killing Iraqi civilians daily. Many Sunni Arabs will condemn terrorism but also believe innocent Sunni Arabs are being targeted unfairly by Jabr's security forces. This belief impedes Sunni Arab leaders from engaging politically with the Shi'a and accepting that political compromises will add to, not diminish, their community's safety. For Jabr to really make a positive impact on the Sunni Arab community, he must show credible and tangible efforts to stop alleged abuses, not promises. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) In a July 7 press conference, senior SCIRI official and Minister of Interior Baqr Jabr outlined the Ministry's three top priorities of providing security, fighting corruption, and protecting the human rights of Iraqis. Jabr distributed the 'manifesto' he said MOI had disseminated to police, commandos, special forces, and border patrol agents across Iraq. Even though criminals are killing and perpetrating violence against innocent Iraqis, said Jabr, they must be treated in accordance with human rights standards. (COMMENT: In the document, Jabr wrote "we will not allow any violations of human rights, torture, or any other form of abuse." Further, the document notes that Jabr himself will conduct spot visits to police facilities and personally follow these issues. END COMMENT.)

13. (U) Jabr's press conference focused more on Operation Lightning successes, the reduction of crime in Baghdad, and successes in capturing insurgent elements than on human rights issues. Jabr did not refer to either specific allegations of abuse or progress in ongoing investigations. The only specific example of culpability he cited was the recent arrest of the Tikrit police chief for unspecified crimes (these we understand relate to the chief's time as Police Chief in Maysan province during the Saddam regime). Jabr said that he did not approve of the arrest because the police chief had done a good job. However, as the criminal court had issued an arrest warrant, he had no choice.

14. (U) MOI Inspector General Nori al-Nouri then provided statistics about corruption and human rights cases, focusing primarily on cases dealing with corruption. He noted that 323 investigative committees were established in the last two months, resulting in 81 cases. Of these cases, 36 have been referred to the courts, most of which deal with contracting irregularities, forgery, and fraud. Nouri referred to human rights cases as the "most important topic" but failed to say anything substantive about any of them. He merely noted that subcommittees had been formed to assess detainee issues, saying these committees are following through on allegations and concluding "that is all I will say on this."

15. (U) Several members of the press questioned Jabr

about allegations of torture and abuse in MOI detention facilities. Jabr claimed only one newspaper had printed such allegations and that the reports were a "misrepresentation." Further, when a reporter complained about the press' lack of access to MOI officials, Jabr countered that operational security concerns often preclude such access. Additionally, he insisted that non-governmental (NGO) and human rights organizations have access to MOI. He claimed that representatives of any such organizations should feel free to contact him. (COMMENT: We have heard from numerous sources, including the Ministries of Human Rights and Justice, human rights NGOs, and international human rights organizations, that access continues to be a problem -- particularly in Baghdad and, specifically, within MOI Headquarters. END COMMENT.)

SUNNI REACTION

16. (C) Private Sunni Arab reaction to Jabr's press conference has ranged from negative to scathing. The National Dialogue's Saleh Mutlek on July 8 told Poloff that he doubted Jabr's veracity, particularly regarding his statements about the misrepresentation of reports of torture and abuse by police. Likewise, the Sunni Endowment's Naji Ithawi told Poloff July 8 that Jabr is "a liar." The Sunni community, he complained, does not see Jabr as credible. "You saw the pictures," stated Ithawi, referring to photographs of dead bodies the Sunni Endowment has provided that clearly show evidence of torture. "How can he say there is no torture?"

COMMENT

17. (C) This press conference was touted as a forum to discuss human rights, but in fact the Ministry of Interior officials did not go into much detail about their efforts to protect human rights. Jabr offered little substantive information about human rights abuses by police forces or concrete steps taken to address them. Contrary to Jabr's claim that reports of abuse and torture are a misrepresentation, there have been numerous, often credible, allegations -- by the media, human rights NGOs, private citizens, prison officials, and witnesses -- that police are perpetrating human rights abuses. Post has discussed many of these reports with Jabr, who has repeatedly promised to investigate the allegations. Additionally, the perception -- especially within the Sunni Arab community -- is that police forces enjoy impunity when it comes to allegations of abuse against Sunni Arabs (reftels). Jabr had a prime opportunity to report tangible results showing that, in fact, MOI is committed to protecting the rights of all Iraqis -- regardless of religious or ethnic orientation. Instead, he fell short of the mark, coming across as vague and defensive. To be fair to the Interior Minister, he is trying to stop a terror campaign and insurgency that is killing Iraqi civilians daily. Many Sunni Arabs will condemn terrorism but also believe innocent Sunni Arabs are being targeted unfairly in the security campaign. This belief impedes Sunni Arab leaders from engaging politically with the Shi'a and accepting that political compromises will add to, not diminish, their community's safety. For Jabr to really make a positive impact, especially on the Sunni Arab community, he needs to show that there have been serious investigations of alleged abuses, that these investigations have determined a set of facts and, if the facts so speak, then specific, named officials responsible for abuses have been punished. END COMMENT.

18. (U) REO HILLA, REO BASRA, REO MOSUL, and REO KIRKUK, minimize considered.

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